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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes the context of moves by school districts to install school program-planning activities in the local school site, and traces the implications of greater decision-making authority at the local school on (1) the overall organization and governance of schooling, and (2) the viability of these activities at the local school level. Major necessary strategies are suggested to improve schools as organizations before school personnel can engage productively in program-planning and other forms of school decision-making. (Author/MLF)

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Local School Program Planning
Organizational Implications

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Local School Program Planning - Organizational Implications

The purpose of this paper is to establish the context in which recent moves have been made by school districts to install school program planning activities in the local school site, and to trace the many implications this pattern of fostering greater decision-making authority at the local school has (a) on the overall organization and governance of schooling, and (b) or the viability of these activities at the local school level. Hopefully the analysis presented by the paper will contribute to a more realistic understanding of the problems, promises and potential outcomes of school level program planning and other forms of school site decision-making.

The Context of Local School Program Planning

Various sources of information suggest that a relatively powerful school of thought has become prominent in the nation over the past five years. In its more simplified form this school of thought maintains that public as well as private organizations have extended far beyond human scale. As a result, the logic follows, individuals' abilities to hold these organizations accountable for the quality of goods and services produced, as well as for the environmental impact of their operations, have become a critical issue of our times.

The action implications of this approach can be stated as follows: first, to reduce the scale of these organizations, and secondly, to encourage

consumer initiative and involvement in efforts designed to affect the decision made by these organizations. Of course, this description represents an oversimplification of the movement which is its referent. It may even create a misleading impression by (1) implying there is one universal school of thought, (2) suggesting that action implications are to reduce size when other individuals would agree that counter-vailing size is a more potent response and (3) indirectly alledging that the impetus for reducing the scale of such organizations lies entirely external to the organizations themselves.

Nevertheless, the thrust of the analysis appears accurate and although the impact of the school of thought advocating human scale organizations extends far beyond the realm of education, a powerful effect has been experienced in the area of school administration and governance. Guthrie points out, "The public no longer completely controls one of its major institutions, the school. This loss of power has not been the result of any simple process, or set of recently evolved conspiracies. Moreover, not all parts of this power shift are unique to public education. In some ways, bureaucratization and the blighting concept that 'bigger is better' have drained citizen control from many branches of government."[1]

The thesis of this paper holds that school level program planning constitutes one aspect of this movement to counter the "bigger is better" tendencies of organizations in our society. School level program planning, however, represents an internal or organizational response as opposed to an externally imposed solution such as state mandated decentralization

schemes or parent advocacy groups.

Moving program planning under the control of the local school purportedly permits greater adaptation to local needs sensed only at the local school site. Additionally, corrective and adaptive measures can be locally made on school curriculum packages and other centrally developed instructional programs in the manner more technically thought of as custom engineering. Therefore, defined as such, localizing program planning to the school site constitutes an element or form of school district decentralization, i.e., the act of overtly placing decision-making responsibility in the sub-units of the school organization.[2] In many respects, school decentralization represents the modal response of school districts to the previously described "anti-bigness" movement,[3] although not all school districts have undertaken such plans totally voluntarily.[4] Thus, when one speaks of localizing school program planning, one is referring to the phenomenon of decentralization, albeit that many differences of opinion exist over precisely which decisions should be localized.

Placing school level program planning in this context raises a number of intriguing organizational questions. For example, how far is it judicious to go in transferring decision-making authority to the local school? Are we witnessing the demise of the central office as an organizational entity? Will school districts divide into smaller constituencies? On the other side of the question are questions about whether this growth of institutions like public education will continue? If so, what organizational forms will appear? These questions and others are explored in the remainder of this paper.

Is Organizational Bigness Declining In the Field of Education?

At first glance, it would seem that the growth of educational organizations has reached its peak. Most obviously, school district enrollments have been declining. The previous era of school district consolidation appears on the surface to have come to a close. For example, in the late 1800's, there were over 100,000 operating school districts in the country. By 1962 the numbers totalled slightly over 33,000. As of last year, the U.S. Office of Education recorded 16,515 school districts.[5] At the same time, school district decentralization has picked up in intensity. A survey by Ornstein shows that 18 out of 21 school districts with enrollments of 100,000 or more students either had decentralized or planed to do so. Among 44 districts in an enrollment category of 50,000 - 100,000, 29 districts had decentralized or planned to do so.[6]

Disaggregating these figures provides a somewhat different picture. The school districts which enroll greater than 25,000 students constitute only 1.1% of the total 16,515. At the same time, this small proportion of school districts serve a vastly disproportionate number of children. 33.1% of the school districts enroll less than 300 students, while approximately 78% of the districts enroll less than 2,500 students.[7] Although these figures can tell us little about the viability of school level program planning, they do suggest that decentralization will probably not eradicate some degree of consolidation continually occurring, especially as the demand for special services and curricula increases and small districts find it difficult to finance such programs. In fact, this is the very argument which has currently been advanced for regional service centers. Such centers could provide both regulatory

and technical assistance resources to school districts on a scale which singular small districts could not undertake in the fields of personnel, transportation, special programs and community services.[8]

The regional service center is not only being promoted for rural on non-metropolitan areas. Many have argued for expanding this structure of a somewhat meta-school district to metropolitan areas. The Laverne proposal in the New York State legislature following upon recommendations made by the Fleischmann Commission asked for a two-tiered operational system which would include local and regional districts.[9] This plan would have relieved the local districts, the first tier, of special education program responsibilities, placing these responsibilities in the second tier, the regional school system, which would have responsibility for administering regional schools which could be integrated into local school settings. The proposal cited several important advantages of this structure. First, the proposal noted that the Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) were set up only as a temporary system pending the development of intermediate school districts. Large cities were excluded from this original temporary system. The new two-tiered arrangement offerred regional or statewide teacher bargaining opportunities relieving the local districts of this time-consuming task, regional support for other institutional education (vocational schools, etc.) and a regional focus for education which would enable outsiders like private schools, colleges, universities, museums and libraries to become involved.

The New York Fleischmann Commission proposals themselves are interesting in this regard.[10] At the same time they strongly supported making

individual schools responsible for many decisions on curriculum, personnel and budget, they recommended the consolidation of small districts and the creation of intermediate school districts which would provide special education programs for handicapped students, vocational education courses as well as other highly specialized courses. Additionally, the Commission suggested the formation of multidisciplinary diagnostic teams through State education department financing which would operate out of the Boards of Cooperative Education Services and thus remove many diagnostic chores from the province of the local school or local district. Of course, the Commission, in perhaps its most remembered recommendations, stood soundly behind the creation of smaller community school jurisdictions within the New York City School District.

What stands out about these proposals is the manner in which they move in somewhat contradictory organizational directions simultaneously. Their organizational impact is to move to a larger scale organizational structure, and at the same time to move toward localizing a greater number of decisions. In short, school districts may be growing both larger and smaller at the same time. Nystrand and Cunningham further support this observation noting that although the prognosis seems to indicate that local school boards will continue, the changes they may face are two-pronged: (1) the prospect of metropolitan school boards, and (2) the prospect of sub-boards existing within the district.[11]

One can well dispute the speed with which developments along the lines of metropolitan school districts and regional service centers

are proceeding. Undoubtedly, recent court decisions such as Milliken vs. Bradley have removed much of the impetus from the metropolitan school district advocates who saw metropolitan structures as a solution for the racial imbalance patterns of large urban areas.[12] This decision has precluded a remedy incorporating suburban school districts into urban districts when evidence is non-existent that these non-city systems had practiced discrimination. Nevertheless, other pressures exist in the direction of metropolitan or intermediate school districts. Special program requirements, costs, mobility patterns and child diagnostic requirements are among these. The present moment seems to indicate, however, that at least temporarily the localization thrust proceeds with much greater rapidity than the metropolitan thrust, largely because the former is easier and more acceptable. Over the remainder of the decade, the metropolitan thrust may accelerate.

The implications of these trends are quite obvious. First bigness is not necessarily declining in the field of educational organizations, although greater decision-making authority is being transferred to local school sites. Secondly, what seems to be emerging rather than a simpler form of organization is a more complex form[13] with additional layers and linkages. The pendulum metaphor used to describe the swing from centralization to decentralization of school districts may in fact be a very one dimensional metaphor which does not capture the manner in which school organizations are becoming more complex, not less. It is provacative to think that the recent efforts at decentralized decision-making are in reality mechanisms to enable individuals to cope with even larger organizational configurations.[14]

If it is valid to assume that educational organizations are becoming more complex, and the foregoing remarks seem to offer some assurance of this validity, it would be instructive to consider the perspective put forth by Lawrence and Lorsch regarding the integration and differentiation requirements of complex organizations.[15] Briefly stated, these authors have found that the more effective manufacturing firms they studied (in terms of output criteria) in industries characterized by high diversity were more differentiated than the less effective firms. They also found these more effective firms had simultaneously achieved higher states of integration between subunits. Lawrence and Lorsch defined differentiation as the differences among sub-units in cognitive and attitudinal orientations. Integration was defined as the state of collaboration between major pairs of subunits.

The significance of these findings for the questions about the size and complexity trends of educational organizations which are the focus of concern in this paper, stems from the strong case they build for more differentiated, integrated sub-systems when a highly diverse environment surrounds the organization. It might be hypothesized that suggestions for regional service centers or meta-level school districts are efforts to capture this differentiation. Derr in his application of the Lawrence and Lorsch model to a large urban school district found that although the diversity of the environment required greater differentiation, the system which he studied had developed a very low state of it.[16] With

regard to integration, Derr found that although groups reported a high degree of perceived collaboration, in reality a low degree appeared to exist since little interaction occurred among administrators on work-related issues. One might also reasonably anticipate, therefore, that the increases in the complex configuration of educational organizations will necessitate the greater development of differentiation and integration. This might be realized through reduced overlap of functions and possibly through liaison or linking personnel between the various layers of the system.

Organizational Implications At the Local School Level

Certainly the most dramatic and obvious trend of the two pronged transformation presently occurring in school organizations is the decentralization movement which encompasses the efforts to establish local school site program planning. As has been previously suggested, the move to greater localization of decision-making will no doubt occur much more rapidly than the counter move to large scale educational service and regulatory structures. Perhaps one should first look for answers to questions about the viability of school site decision-making before attempting to trace the organizational implications of this change.

The evidence regarding the success of more localized school decision-making seems to far outweigh any reports of its failures. Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with the desirability of supporting more moves in this direction. A recent study in Michigan investigating successful and unsuccessful compensatory education programs reports that the "factors which discriminate, if not account for, the difference

between effective and non-effective comp-ed programs, are for the most part 'controllable' by local district staff, and are usually those at the building level."[17] Among these factors were (1) the principal's classroom monitoring role and the principal's delegation of decision-making over certain factors to the classroom teachers, (2) the teachers' role, i.e. the degree of decision-making delegated to them and the amount of time allocated by teachers to instruction management activities including diagnosis and prescription and the development of individualized student performance objectives, and (3) the nature and extend of coordination among building staff. The last factor appears to be remarkably similar to the concept of organizational integration applied to the local school level.

In another study from California examining the impact of school site budgeting arrangements (i.e., moving budgetary decisions to the local school), it appears that such reform has had an effect upon decision outcomes.[18] This study points to the differential decisions among schools which resulted from the inclusion of new actors at the local school site who were given the opportunity to develop budgetary priorities as compared to previous central office determination of priorities. Interestingly, this California study also reports other significant effects of school site management. First, an increased flow of information between the district office and the school site seems to occur. Secondly, administrative costs seem to increase as a result of this increased flow, and thirdly, teacher morale appears to increase.

If one may extrapolate from these studies, the move to greater local site control seems to have direct pay off in terms of teacher morale and program effectiveness. On the other hand, depending on the extent to which decisions are transferred to the local school site (e.g., whether budgetary decision control is permitted along with school program planning), managerial tasks and concomitant administrative cost appear to increase. However, one could also persuasively follow the differentiation/integration model previously articulated and predict similar cost increases for any basic reorienting of school personnel into linkage roles and permitting release time opportunities for teacher planning activities. These of course, may reduce sharply once initial capital outlays have been made, and new roles are in place.

None of the above cost increases are unwarranted in the views of this author since true gains seem to accrue as a result of them. But it does seem essential to point to the realities of greater localized decision-making, and not permit tax-payers to develop expectations of reduced costs because of a misplaced notion that the educational system is becoming more simplified.

Despite the positive evidence regarding school level program planning and other forms of decentralized control, several knotty organizational problems remain. At the substantive level, one might raise serious questions about how far localized control of school decisions should go and at what point the costs far outweigh any benefits. Secondly, there are questions regarding changed roles and role orientations which have

not been realized to any extent to date. Thirdly, there are questions at the local school organizational level about how to avoid parochial thinking and too great a reliance on modes of operation best described as muddling through.[19]

In response to the first question of the extent to which decisions should be incorporated into the local school site, the evidence is still being accumulated and interpreted. One can theoretically make a strong case for inclusion of budgetary control in the mix of decisions for which the local school is responsible by advancing arguments about the importance of purse string control to the implementation of any very different planning choices. Obversely, as much flexibility may in fact exist without full budgetary discretion. Fortunately several natural experiments are occurring around the country (in Florida and in California) which may in the future provide greater insight. As the first half of this paper sought to demonstrate, certain limits will no doubt exist regarding the extent to which the local school unit can become the decisional focus.

The questions regarding role and role orientation pertain to two significant groups in the local school organization: the principal and the teachers. Several sources have pointed to the critical role played by the principal in efforts to make schools more responsive. Sarason writes that the principal is the crucial implementer of change. "One can realign forces of power, change administrative structures, and increase budgets for materials and new personnel, but the intended effects of all these changes will be drastically diluted by principals whose past experiences and training, interacting

with certain personality factors, ill prepares them for the role of educational and intellectual leader." [20] The Michigan State Department study previously cited found the principal's management style an important factor in the effectiveness of the programs studied. Other studies concur.[21]

At the same time, descriptive, "state of the art" studies point to a rather tormented picture of the principalship. Wolcott in his ethnography depicts a principal who is bound by a crisis orientation and a mode of operation in which every occurrence is important.[22] Wolcott remarks that the principal far from being the primary agent of change is in fact the primary maintainer of the status quo. Coupled with this finding are reports of the principal in actuality being consumed by activities of discipline and building control, this finding especially being applicable to urban school principals.[23] In virtually no studies known to this author are school principals satisfied with the changes in their roles. The overwhelming preference among principals is for the principalship to return to a role of instructional leader. Management activities are seen as burdensome and unpleasant role incursions. [24]

Yet these new managerial responsibilities and the greater exercise of delegation of decision-making authority within the local school will constitute important elements of the principal's job in the future. Principals need to gain confidence in sharing their authority at the same time being held singularly accountable for the programs and activities of the school. Managing budgets, coordinating staffs composed of differentiated specialists, and linking the school

with other subsystems of the school district organization as well as of the school attendance area are activities which depart widely from a past role configuration of instructional leader. It is the contention of this author, however, that many principals elected to move into the principalship and out of the classroom because they saw the position offering instructional supervision activities, not managerial activities.

Training programs are perhaps one solution to reorienting individual principals to a new role orientation and equipping them with new skills. These programs, however, need to be rethought from a university-based model to models which deal more with the principal's on-the-job learning. They may be ideally suited as undertakings of the regional centers previously referred to.

New roles and role orientations for teachers has already been alluded to as teachers take on more linking roles with other school system sub-units and are required to share more information and knowledge within the local school organization. In many respects, however, the problems which ensue for the teacher from greater localization of decision-making sound trivial. Yet these problems can be overwhelming in conjunction. For example, release time arrangements for planning activities are costly for local schools. Union participation in the decisions regarding release time arrangements is essential in some areas. Additionally structures such as teacher centers have to be implemented and financed in order that in-service training becomes more responsive to individual school program plans.

Both teachers and administrators face the problem of becoming too heavily reliant on muddling through modes of behavior which restrict the number of goals and means which are considered in the process of establishing local school priorities. This potential drift toward expediency behavior is perhaps most troublesome for urban schools which are beset by multiple problems and crises on a day to day basis. Of course, there is no reason to presume that centralized decision-making avoids short-term coping behavior any better than localized decision-making. In fact, the evidence in many cases is on the contrary. However, local school actors do require access to stimulating ideas and different instructional and/or organizational strategies in order to expand the pool of ideas which are considered. Again, the need becomes clear for adequate support services and technical assistance services either within or external to the school system.

In this regard, the research endeavors of the School Capacity for Problem Solving program within the National Institute of Education may be helpful in uncovering both a variety of successful organizational strategies for local schools to use as well as new knowledge about ways to deliver technical assistance to local schools. This program has made grant monies available to local schools, private organizations and school districts to experiment with techniques for improving the response capacity of the local school organization.

Conclusions

This analysis has covered the wide panoply of the organizational/governance configuration of K-12 education. It represents a type of trend analysis.

Such endeavors are often subject to error since they attempt to interpret broad indicators and speculate about future phenomena. In short, there is no assurance that the conclusions drawn in this paper are mistake-proof. The actual course of events may prove them misguided. The conclusions, however, do provide a context in which to place school level program planning. They also put forth one perspective about where next steps ought to be taken.

The first conclusion, and one which is significant in this author's opinion, is that bigness is here to stay; or perhaps more appropriately stated, organizational complexity is here to stay. As much as more local decision-making is necessary, more "meta"level structures in educational governance are deemed necessary. These structures may be slower in evolving, but are probably not going to fade away in the era of decentralization.

The second conclusion drawn from this analysis is that localizing greater decision-making power in the local school unit provides a means, and importantly, an effective means, for coping with the problems presented by organizational structures which transcend the scale at which human beings can deal with them. The evidence on the side of decentralizing school decision-making is impressive and should encourage greater experimentation on the part of schools with the various arrangements which are possible.

The third conclusion derives from the previous two. Organizational complexity will demand far more elaborate and intensive efforts to develop organizational differentiation and integration. What the mechanisms are for achieving these states remains speculative. Improvements in information processing and flow may be useful. More individuals who perform boundary-spanning roles between sub-units may be necessary or

alternatively, shared employees may emerge. More careful articulation of various unit functions might also prove fruitful. Such articulation would spell out details about the responsibilities of the different components of the system.

Finally, at the level of the school site itself organizational improvements are needed. The current organizational roles and daily operating activities of schools in many ways act as negative forces on adequate school site decision-making whether it be program planning or budgetary allocation decisions. Principals and teachers need to behave in different ways and with different planning and managerial skills. Training and technical assistance activities can help in many respects. More concrete structural changes will also be necessary such as reworking scheduling hours, in-service structures which serve local school needs, and additional managerial support roles which relieve the principal of paperwork tasks and also permit liaison roles with other organization units.

However, the limits to which it is useful to move in localizing educational decision-making are unclear. Just as unclear are effective ways by which to train or retrain educational personnel and to provide useful technical assistance to local school sites. Fortunately, experimentation in many of these areas is underway which will provide some valuable guidance.

FOOTNOTES

1. James W. Guthrie, "Public Control of Public Schools: Can we get H Back?" in Public Affairs Report, Bulletin of the Institute of Governmental Studies, Vol. 15, No. 3, June 1974, p. 1.

2. No attempt will be made to engage in the controversy of administrative decentralization. See David O' Shea, "Theoretical Perspectives on School District Decentralization" paper related to American Educational Research Association, December, 1973, and Allan C. Ornstein, "Metropolitan Schools: Administrative Decentralization vs. Community Control, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 54, No. 10, June 1973, pp. 668-674. In this study centralization and decentralization are viewed as two opposite points on a continuum in which the variable is decision-making authority.

3. See Allan C. Ornstein, Race and Politics in School Community Organizations, Goodyear, Pacific Palisades, California, 1974.

4. Los Angeles, New York City, and Detroit are notable in this regard either having the State legislatures direct them to decentralize or actually structuring the decentralization plan.

5. James W. Guthrie, Op. Cit. p. 2: R.O Nystrand and L.L. Cunningham, "The Dynamics of Local School Control," Paper Presented at National Symposium on State School Finance Reform, Washington, D.C., November 26 and 27, 1973.

6. Allan C. Ornstein, Op. Cit., p.5.

7. John E. Uxor, "Regional Service Centers Serving Both Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan Areas," Paper presented to the National Conference Sponsored by the National Federation for the Improvement of Rural Education, University of New Mexico, January 1974.

8. L.R. Tamblyn, Rural Education in the U.S., Washington, D.C. Rural Education Association, 1971, p. 12.

9. N.Y. State Joint Legislative Committee on Metropolitan and Regional Areas, "Regionalism: Helping Schools Meet Children's Needs. A Study Document," Albany, N.Y., December, 1972.

10. The Fleischmann Report on the Quality, Cost, and Financing of Elementary and Secondary Education in New York State, Vol. I-III, Viking Press, N.Y., 1972.

11. R.O. Nystrand and L.L. Cunningham, Op. Cit.

12. Joseph V. Julian, Racial Isolation in the Public Schools: Whither the Law of the Land, Preliminary Draft of a Report prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education (Policy Development), Contract No. OEC-0-72-5017, Educational Finance and Governance Center, Syracuse University Research Corporation February, 1975.

13. Complex organizations are defined in this paper as organizations which exhibit a high amount of sub-system connectedness and interaction in the accomplishment of multiple organizational goals.

14. I am indebted to Dr. Anthony Carnevale, Policy Analyst, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education, Department of HEW for this observation.

15. For a discussion of this approach see P.R. Lawrence and J.W. Lorsch, Organizations and Environment. Irwin, Homewood, Illinois, 1968.

16. C. Brooklyn Derr, "An Organizational Analysis of the Boston School Department," unpublished doctoral thesis, The Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1971.

17. Statement by Michigan Department of Education, Education Turnkey Systems, Inc., regarding Michigan Department of Education release of results of Compensatory Education Cost-Effectiveness Study, March 5, 1975, p. 2.

18. Patricia A. Craig, "Determinants and Effects of School-Site Management Reform in California Public Schools," Paper presented to the 1974 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.

19. Popularly used this term implies a rather crisis-orientation to planning or a series of short-run coping activities. Lindblom uses the term in a somewhat more systematic way. See C. E. Lindblom, "The Science of "Muddling Through;," Public Administration Review, Vol. 19, 1959, p. 155-169. I am indebted for this general distinction to Dr. Matthew B. Miles, Senior Research Associate, Center for Policy Research, N.Y.C.

20. Seymour Sarason, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change, Allyn and Bacon, New Jersey, 1971, p. 148-9.

21. The list is long but among those are the current "Change-Agent Study" of the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California, 1974; Lonnie H. Wagstaff and Russell Spillman, "Who Should Be a Principal?" National Elementary Principal, Vol. 53, No. 5, July-August, 1974 pp 35-38; Richard Williams and Charles Wall, Effecting Organizational Renewal, Mc-Graw, N.Y., to be published.

22. Harry F. Wolcott, The Man In the Principal's Office, An Ethnography New York, Holt, 1973.

23. State of New York, Office of Education Performance Review, "The Public School Principal, An Overview," December, 1974.

24. Los Angeles Association of Elementary School Principals, "The Principalship in Crisis, A Presentation to the Los Angeles City Board of Education," March, 1972; A.J. Vidich and C. McReynolds, "Study of New York City High School Principals" in Anthropological Perspectives in Education (eds.) Murray L. Wax, Stanley Diamond and F.O. Gearing, New York, Basic Books, 1971, p. 195-207; Mary T. Moore," The Boundary-Spanning Role of the Urban School Principal, Doctoral dissertation, U.C.L.A., in process.